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is a nice book

## *Preface*

I WAS commissioned to write the three articles which make up this little book by The Saturday Evening Post. They are now reissued to satisfy the large number of persons who have expressed their desire to possess them in a form of somewhat greater permanence and in the hope that they will be useful to many who did not chance to come across them when they appeared in the pages of the magazine. I was limited to four thousand words, and though I think I slightly exceeded this, it must be plain that in that space I could not hope to deal with my subject otherwise than in the most cursory manner. There was in truth in each of my articles matter for a fat volume. My object was to give to such readers as are confused by the great riches which we have inherited from the authors of the past a list of books which anyone who is interested in the things of the spirit could read with pleasure and



profit; but since I had to take care to make my list short enough not to dismay, I had to leave out a great many works of high significance. With few exceptions I have only mentioned one book by each author, but there are many authors, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Balzac and Dostoevsky, to name but a handful of novelists, who have written several books which have all the qualifications for a place in my list. I had to leave out certain authors of merit, such as Charlotte Brontë, because I had no room for anyone not quite of the first class, and I had to omit all reference to lesser books, such as Izaak Walton's *Lives* and James Morier's *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, books delightful to read, because I could not afford to ask you to occupy yourself with any but recognized masterpieces. So, if I were taking a friend, who had enthusiasm but not much time, round a gallery of antique sculpture, I would ask him to direct his attention not to Roman portraiture, though I would not deny its interest, nor even to the statuary of the archaic period, exciting as I find it, but to give all his powers of apprehension to the great works that have come down to us from the golden age of Greece.

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This little book is necessarily slight, but I trust you, the reader, will not find it superficial. I have written its chapters not as a critic (which indeed I am not) nor even as a writer by profession (for in that capacity my interest in literature would tend to be special) but as the plain man with a proper interest in humanity. The first thing I have asked of a book before I put it on my list was that it should be readable; for I want you to read these books, and readability is something which I have a notion the professors of literature and the critics whom they have trained take for granted. / But it is not a thing to be taken for granted at all. There are many books important in the history of literature which it is now unnecessary for anybody but the student to read. Few people have the time to-day to read anything but what immediately concerns them. My claim is that the books I have mentioned in the following pages concern everybody. By readability I do not mean that it should be possible to read the book without attention. The reader must bring something of his own; he must have at least the capacity of interesting himself in human affairs and he must have at least some imagination. I know a number



of people who say they cannot read novels, and I have noticed that they are apt to suppose that it is because, their minds being busy with important matters, they cannot trouble to occupy themselves with imaginary events; but I think they are deceived; it is either because they are so absorbed in themselves that they cannot take an interest in what happens to others, or because they are so devoid of imagination that they have not the power to enter into the ideas and sympathize with the joys and sorrows of the characters of fiction. No book is readable if you have neither curiosity nor fellow-feeling. To be readable a book must mean something to you here and now, it is but one quality among the others it may have, and it is a quality relative to the interests of the reader. I am confident that on the whole the books I have recommended will appeal to the person of ordinary interests because they have that humanity which is common to us all.

You will notice that I have written the chapter on the classic books of America on slightly different lines from those on which I wrote the other two, and I think I should explain the reason of this. When I dealt with European literature the mass of

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material was so great that I could afford to speak only of books which all right-minded men have agreed are masterly. I had nothing to do but commend them. If a book did not seem to me to deserve almost unqualified praise, I had no need to mention it. But when I came to American books I was in a different situation. The history of American literature is short. If I had adopted the same standard I should have had no more than perhaps four writers to speak of. I did not think that would be very useful. It seemed to me that I should be of greater service to you if I told you what I feel about certain writers who because they are American rightly demand your attention, but whom now that American literature has found its feet it is sensible to regard without national bias. I have asked you to read them for yourselves and decide their value for you regardless of the opinions of authority. I repeat here what you will find in my first chapter, that the only thing that signifies to you in a book is what it means to you, and if your opinion is at variance with that of everyone else in the world it is of no consequence. Your opinion is valid for you. In matters of art people, especially, I think, in

America, are apt to accept willingly from professors and critics a tyranny which in matters of government they would rebel against. But in these questions there is no right and wrong. The relation between the reader and his book is as free and intimate as that between the mystic and his God. Of all forms of snobbishness the literary is perhaps the most detestable, and there is no excuse for the fool who despises his fellow-man because he does not share his opinion of the value of a certain book. Pretence in literary appreciation is odious, and no one should be ashamed if a book that the best critics think highly of means nothing to him. On the other hand it is better not to speak ill of such books if you have not read them. To go back to American literature: because it has been in existence so short a time and its products are scanty, sundry authors have attained an eminence and their works are regarded with a reverence which are to my mind undeserved. America can well afford now to look at them without the prejudice of patriotism and, viewing them as citizens of the world, which great artists are, rather than as Americans, esteem them at their proper value.

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The narrow limits to which I was confined obliged me in my article on English literature only to name a certain number of novels, and for my own satisfaction I propose to take advantage of this preface to say something more about three of these. They are Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds*, Meredith's *The Egoist* and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. When I wrote I had not read them for many years, but since then I have done so again. I suggested that you should read *The Eustace Diamonds* rather than *Barchester Towers*, which is Trollope's best-known novel, because it is complete in itself. It seemed to me that really to appreciate *Barchester Towers* you would have to read the series of which it is a part. Neither the motives of the characters nor the results of their activities are quite clear unless you read the novels that come before and after, and I did not think that Trollope was important enough, keeping in view my object of asking you to read books which would be pleasant and profitable, to justify me in asking you to read half a dozen closely-printed volumes. And I remembered that there was in *Barchester Towers* a good deal of that caricature which to us now seems a tiresome feature of Victorian fiction.

But now that I have read *The Eustace Diamonds* once more, I should recommend you even with these slight drawbacks to read the more celebrated book. *The Eustace Diamonds* is by way of being a detective story and it has two very ingenious surprises, but it is told at inordinate length. We have learnt a good deal about the manner of writing fiction of this kind since then, and a modern writer could have made a much better story of it by compressing it into three hundred pages. The characters are soundly observed, but they are not very interesting, and most of them are the stock figures of Victorian fiction. You have the impression that Trollope was trying to write the sort of novel that was bringing Dickens so much success, and not making a very good job of it. The most human character is Lizzie Eustace, but Trollope had apparently, or at least wished his readers to have, so great an antipathy for her that he treats her unfairly, and just as when a lawyer browbeats a prisoner in court your sympathies regardless of his crime go out to him, so you feel that Lizzie wasn't really so much worse than anybody else and therefore scarcely deserved the hard knocks the author has given her. The novel



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can, however, be read without difficulty, and for anyone interested in Victorian England there is a good deal of entertainment to be got by observing the manners and customs of that long-past day. This is cold commendation. But though I advise you in place of *The Eustace Diamonds* to read *Barchester Towers*, I am constrained to add that you would be unwise to expect too much from it. The merit of Trollope has of late years been somewhat exaggerated. For a generation he was almost forgotten, and when he was rediscovered, having in the interval acquired the charm of a period piece, greater praise was awarded him than he deserves. He was an honest and industrious craftsman with a considerable power of observation. He had some gift of pathos and he could tell a straightforward story in a straightforward, though terribly diffuse, way; but he had neither passion, wit nor subtlety. He had no talent for revealing a character or resuming the significance of an episode in a single pregnant phrase. His interest now lies in his unaffected, accurate and sincere portrayal of a state of society which has perished.

Fifty years ago every intelligent young man with pretensions to culture read Meredith with

enthusiasm. He was read as a generation later young men read Shaw and as ten years ago they read T. S. Eliot. Now he has, I believe, few readers among the young. But *The Egoist* is a fine novel. It is true that it deals with a class of society which we no longer regard with the awe which George Meredith thought was its due. We no longer accept these country gentlemen, these opulent ladies who drive about in barouches, as the salt of the earth, and their behaviour too often strikes us as vulgar and trivial. The world has changed since Meredith wrote, and it is hard for us now to be seriously impressed when Clara Middleton, a high-spirited girl of independent mind and ample fortune, makes such a to-do about breaking her engagement with Sir Willoughby Patterne after she has discovered that she no longer cares for him. The girls of our own time would have found it easy to deal with the situation. We demand plausibility in our novels nowadays and we are only impatient with difficulties which can be avoided by the exercise of common sense. When at last Clara makes up her mind to run away to London she slips out of the house with trepidation and walks to the station, but, a storm

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arising, she gets her feet wet and so misses the train, whereupon she is persuaded to return. She showed little of the wiliness which is supposed to be characteristic of her sex. It is strange that it never occurred to her that as she was going to be married she would need some clothes and no one could think it odd that she should go to London to try them on.

Meredith wrote in a manner which does not make his books easy to read. This posturing of his, this cutting of capers and jumping through verbal hoops, is very tiresome. You would think that he found it almost impossible to make a plain statement plainly, and his wit, on which he seems to have prided himself, is tortured. But he had a gift for creating characters of such vitality that you can never quite forget them. They are not, like for instance the characters of *Moby Dick*, a little larger than life size, but they are something more than ordinary human beings. They have the artificiality of the persons in a comedy by Congreve, but it is not a dead artificiality; Meredith has inspired them with his own gusto and they live, like the puppets in Hoffmann's old story which the magician brought to life, with a radiance all their own. They are truly

creations and only a real novelist could have invented them. It is this gusto which enables you to read Meredith, if you can read him at all, with delight notwithstanding the coruscations of his style, the falseness of his values and the occasional clumsiness of his intrigue; he carries on his story with a fine swing and you are hurried along with him on the wings of his high spirits and boisterous, windswept joy in the exercise of his creative faculty. *The Egoist* is Meredith's best novel because his subject here was universal. Egoism is the mainspring of human nature. It is the one quality from which we can never escape (I do not like to call it a vice, though it is the ugliest of our vices, because it is also the marrow of our virtues), for it determines our existence. Without it we should not be what we are. Without it we should be nought. And yet our constant effort must be to check its claims and we can only live well if we do our best to suppress it. In *Sir Willoughby Patterne*, Meredith has drawn such a portrait of an egoist as has never been drawn before or since. But I think no one can read this book without some qualms of conscience, for he must be even a greater egoist than *Sir Willoughby*

if he does not see in himself some of the traits at least which make Sir Willoughby at once odious and absurd. Meredith was right when he said that his wretched hero was not this man or that man but all of us. So when I recommend you to read *The Egoist* it is not only because it is a lively, entertaining novel, but because it may teach you something about yourself that it is good for you to know.

Now I come to *Middlemarch*. Judged simply as a piece of fiction it seems to me better than either of the novels I have just been discussing. It is an excellent piece of craftsmanship. It cannot have been easy to construct, for George Eliot has taken as her subject not one group of persons in one social sphere, but different groups in different spheres, giving you a picture of the landed gentry who live on their estates round the town of Middlemarch, and the professional men, merchants and tradesmen who inhabit it. You are not asked, as you are by so many novelists, to concern yourself with the fortunes of two or three people who live in a vacuum, as it were, so that the world outside them is of no moment, but with the fortunes of all the sorts and conditions of men who make up the world in which



we all live ; and their various stories are managed with consummate skill. Nor, as often happens when less skilful writers attempt this complicated form of fiction, is your interest confined to one set of characters so that when you are asked to transfer it to another you do so with disinclination ; George Eliot enlists your sympathies equally with them all, and she passes from one lot of people to another as naturally as in real life we pass from the people who are associated with one side of it to the people who are associated with another. This gives the novel a singular air of reality. Although the action begins when George the Fourth was still King of England we say to ourselves that this is the sort of thing we know life to be. The characters, and there are a great many of them, are wonderfully natural ; they are observed with precision, so that each one stands on his own feet, a human being with his own idiosyncrasies ; but George Eliot had no glow and she could not give the creatures of her invention the quality of the archangel which George Meredith was so often able to give his (and it occurs to me that this is a legitimate excuse for Clara Middleton never giving a thought to her trousseau, for doubtless an

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archangel would not consider the need of a wedding-gown); George Eliot saw them coolly, accurately, but with sympathy. Her heroes are no more heroic than we are and her villains no more villainous. She got so into the skin of her personages that we see them not only as others see them but as they see themselves, and thus even Mr. Casaubon is not only a hateful figure but also a pitiable one. They have a modern air, for they are not solely occupied with their emotions; they are concerned with politics and interest themselves in the problems of the day; economic questions enter into their lives as they enter into ours: they have heads as well as hearts. They are in short very much the same sort of people as we are. I should be inclined to sum up my judgment of Middlemarch by saying that George Eliot had every gift of the great novelist but fire. No English author has given an ampler and more reasonable interpretation of life; the one quality that escaped her sensible and sympathetic observation was romance.

Before I close this preface I should like to repair an omission. When I was speaking of anthologies I forgot to mention Robert Bridges' *The Spirit of Man*. A critic of my article objected to my inclusion

of the Oxford Book of English Verse, which to his mind was very bad. I think he was wrong, but I am willing to admit that the later parts of that book contain a number of poems that one could do without. That is inevitable; an anthology is an expression of the anthologist's choice, and it may well be that his taste, sure enough when he is dealing with the writers of the past, falters when he is confronted with those of his own day. Time has a ravaging effect on the work of our contemporaries. None can be certain that what thrills us now will thrill a generation that comes after. But I think it would be a carping critic indeed who found fault with *The Spirit of Man*; it is a very definite statement of a personal attitude, so that the reader will not find in it pieces that do not accord with that attitude; but it contains much of excellence that will be unfamiliar to most readers, for Robert Bridges had wide learning, sound judgment and a passion for beauty. *The Spirit of Man* is a magnanimous and uplifting book.

I close with a quotation from a letter of Doctor Johnson's to Miss Thrale. "They who do not read," he writes to her, "can have nothing to think, and little to say."

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## *I*

ONE isn't always as careful of what one says as one should be. When I stated in a book of mine called *The Summing Up* that young people often came to me for advice on the books they would do well to read, I did not reckon with the consequences. I received a multitude of letters from all manner of persons, asking me what the advice was that I gave. I answered them as best I could, but it is not possible to deal fully with such a matter in a private letter; and as many people seem to desire such guidance as I can offer, it has occurred to me that they might like to have a brief account of what suggestions I have to make from my own experience for pleasant and profitable reading.

The first thing I want to insist on is that reading should be enjoyable. Of course, there are many books that we all have to read, either to pass

examinations or to acquire information, from which it is impossible to extract enjoyment. We are reading them for instruction, and the best we can hope is that our need for it will enable us to get through them without tedium. Such books we read with resignation rather than with alacrity. But that is not the sort of reading I have in mind. The books I shall mention in due course will help you neither to get a degree nor to earn your living, they will not teach you to sail a boat or get a stalled motor to run, but they will help you to live more fully. That, however, they cannot do unless you enjoy reading them.

The "you" I address is the adult whose <sup>occupation</sup> avocations give him a certain leisure and who would like to read the books which cannot without loss be left unread. I do not address the bookworm. He can find his own way. His curiosity leads him along many unfrequented paths and he gathers delight in the discovery of half-forgotten excellence. I wish to deal only with the masterpieces which the consensus of opinion for a long time has accepted as supreme. We are all supposed to have read them; it is a pity that so few of us have. But there are

masterpieces which are acknowledged to be such by all the best critics and to which the historians of literature devote considerable space, yet which no ordinary person can now read with enjoyment. They are important to the student, but changing times and changing tastes have robbed them of their savour and it is hard to read them now without an effort of will. Let me give one instance: I have read George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, but I cannot put my hand on my heart and say that it was with pleasure. I read it from a sense of duty: I finished it with a sigh of relief.

Now of such books as this I mean to say nothing. Every man is his own best critic. Whatever the learned say about a book, however unanimous they are in their praise of it, unless it interests you it is no business of yours. Don't forget that critics often make mistakes, the history of criticism is full of the blunders the most eminent of them have made, and you who read are the final judge of the value to you of the book you are reading. This, of course, applies to the books I am going to recommend to your attention. We are none of us exactly like everyone else, only rather like, and it would be unreasonable to suppose that the books that have meant a great deal

to me should be precisely those that will mean a great deal to you. But they are books that I feel the richer for having read, and I think I should not be quite the man I am if I had not read them. And so I beg of you, if any of you who read these pages are tempted to read the books I suggest and cannot get on with them, just put them down; they will be of no service to you if you do not enjoy them. No one is under an obligation to read poetry or fiction or the miscellaneous literature which is classed as belles-lettres. (I wish I knew the English term for this, but I don't think there is one.) He must read them for pleasure, and who can claim that what pleases one man must necessarily please another?

But let no one think that pleasure is immoral. Pleasure in itself is a great good, all pleasure, but its consequences may be such that the sensible person eschews certain varieties of it. Nor need pleasure be gross and sensual. They are wise in their generation who have discovered that intellectual pleasure is the most satisfying and the most enduring. It is well to acquire the habit of reading. There are few sports in which you can engage to your own satisfaction after you have passed the prime of life; there

are no games except patience, chess problems and crossword puzzles that you can play without someone to play them with you. Reading suffers from no such disadvantages; there is no occupation—except perhaps needlework, but that leaves the restless spirit at liberty—which you can more easily take up at any moment, for any period, and more easily put aside when other calls press upon you; there is no other amusement that can be obtained in these happy days of public libraries and cheap editions at so small a cost. To acquire the habit of reading is to construct for yourself a refuge from almost all the miseries of life. Almost all, I say, for I would not go so far as to pretend that to read a book will assuage the pangs of hunger or still the pain of unrequited love; but half a dozen good detective stories and a hot-water bottle will enable anyone to snap his fingers at the worst cold in the head. But who is going to acquire the habit of reading for reading's sake, if he is bidden to read books that bore him?

It is more convenient to take the books of which I am now going to speak in chronological order, but I can see no reason why, if you make up your mind to read them, you should do so in that order. I



think you would be much better advised to read them according to your fancy; nor do I see even why you should read them one by one. For my own part, I find it more agreeable to read four or five books together. After all, you aren't in the same mood on one day as on another, nor have you the same eagerness to read a certain book at all hours of the day. We must suit ourselves in these matters, and I have naturally adopted the plan that best suits me. In the morning before I start work I read for a while a book, either of science or philosophy, that requires a fresh and attentive brain. It sets me off for the day. Later on, when my work is done and I feel at ease, but not inclined for mental exercise of a strenuous character, I read history, essays, criticism or biography; and in the evening I read a novel. Besides these, I keep on hand a volume of poetry in case I feel in the mood for that, and by my bedside I have one of those books, too rarely to be found, alas, which you can dip into at any place and stop reading with equanimity at the end of any paragraph.

Now, the first book on my list is (Defoe's Moll Flanders.) No English novelist has ever achieved a greater verisimilitude than Defoe; it is hard, indeed,

when you read him, to remember that you are reading a work of fiction; it is more like a consummate piece of reporting. You are convinced that his people spoke exactly as he made them speak, and their actions are so plausible that you cannot doubt that this is how, in the circumstances, they behaved. *Moll Flanders* is not a moral book. It is bustling, coarse and brutal, but it has a robustness that I like to think is in the English character. Defoe had little imagination and not much humour, but he had a wide and varied experience of life and, being an excellent journalist, he had a keen eye for the curious incident and the telling detail. He had no sense of climax, he attempted no pattern; and so the reader is not swept away by a power that he does not seek to resist; he is carried along in the crowd, as it were, and it may be that when he comes to a side street he will slip down it and get away. He may, to put it plainly, after a couple of hundred pages of very much the same sort of thing feel that he has had enough. Well, that's all right. But for my part I am quite willing to accompany my author till he brings his ribald heroine to the haven of respectability tempered with penitence.

Then I should like you to read Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. I am going to deal with Doctor Johnson later on, but here I must note that, speaking of this book, he said: "When once you have thought of big men and little men, it is very easy to do all the rest." Doctor Johnson was an excellent critic and a very wise man, but here he talked nonsense. *Gulliver's Travels* has wit and irony, ingenious invention, broad humour, savage satire and vigour. Its style is admirable. No one has ever written this difficult language of ours more compactly, more lucidly and more unaffectedly than Swift. I could wish that Dr. Johnson had said of him what he said of another: "Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison." He could then have added a third to his pairs of adjectives: virile but not overweening.

Two novels come next. Fielding's Tom Jones is, perhaps, the healthiest novel in English literature. It is a dashing, brave and cheerful book, sturdy and generous; it is, of course, very frank, and Tom Jones, with his good looks and vitality, a friendly fellow whom we should all like to have known, does certain

things which the moralist will deplore. But do we care? Not unless we are solemn prigs, for he is disinterested and his heart is golden. Fielding was, unlike Defoe, a conscious artist; his scheme gave him the opportunity to describe a multitude of incidents and to create a great number of personages. They are splendidly alive in a world that is pungent with the bustle and turmoil of reality. Fielding took himself seriously—as, of course, every author should—and there were many subjects of importance on which he felt called upon to deliver himself. At the beginning of each part he puts a dissertation in which he discusses one thing and another. These have humour and sincerity, but for my part I think they can be skipped without disadvantage. I have a notion that no one can read *Tom Jones* without delight, for it is a manly, wholesome book, without any humbug about it, and it warms the cockles of your heart.

*Sterne's Tristram Shandy* is a novel of very different character. You might say of it what Doctor Johnson said of *Sir Charles Grandison*: "If you were to read it for the story, you would hang yourself." It is a book that, according to your temperament, you will find either as readable as anything you have

ever read, or tiresome and affected. It has no unity. It has no coherence. Digression follows upon digression. But it is wonderfully original, humorous and pathetic; and it increases your spiritual possessions with half a dozen characters so full of idiosyncrasy and so lovable that once you have come to know them, you feel that not to have known them would have been an irreparable loss. Nor would I have anyone fail to read Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*; I have nothing to say of it except that it is enchanting.

Now let us leave fiction for a little. I suppose it is universally acknowledged that Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* is the greatest biography in the language. It is a book that you can read with profit and pleasure at any age. You can pick it up at any time, opening it at random, and be sure of entertainment. But to praise such a work at this time of day is absurd. I should like, however, to add to it a book that, to my mind undeservedly, is less well known. This is Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. The purchase by Colonel Isham of the Boswell manuscripts has resulted in a new and unexpurgated edition of it, for, as I suppose everyone knows, Boswell's manuscript was edited by Malone,



who thought proper to tone it down in accordance with the primly elegant taste of the day, and so left out much that gave the book flavour. It enlarges your knowledge both of Johnson and of Boswell, and if it increases your love and admiration for the sturdy old doctor, it adds also to your respect for his poor biographer who has been so much abused. This is not a writer to be despised, who had such a quick eye for an amusing incident, so much appreciation of a racy phrase, and such a rare gift for reproducing the atmosphere of a scene and the liveliness of a conversation.

The figure of Doctor Johnson towers over the eighteenth century, and he has been accepted as representing the English character, with its sterling merits and unhappy defects, at its best. But if we have all read his biography, so that we know him more intimately than we know many of the people we have passed our lives with, few of us have read any of his writings; and yet he produced one work at least which is in the highest degree enjoyable. I know no better book to take on holiday or to keep at one's bedside than Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*. It is written with limpidity. It has pungency and

humour. It is full of horse sense. Though sometimes his judgments startle us—he found Gray dull and had little good to say of Milton's *Lycidas*—you delight in them because they are an expression of his own personality. He was as much interested in the men he wrote of as in their works, and though you may not have read a word of these, you can hardly fail to be diverted by the shrewd, lively and tolerant observation with which he portrays their authors.

I come next to a book that I name with hesitation, for, as I must remind the reader, I wish to speak here only of books that one would be the poorer for not having read, and though I have a great fondness for Gibbon's Autobiography, I am not quite sure that it would have made much difference to me not to have read it. I should certainly have lost a keen pleasure, but if I mention it I feel that I should mention also a large number of other works, not so great as the greatest, to be judged by a different standard, and they would need a chapter to themselves. But Gibbon's Autobiography is very readable; it is short, written with the peculiar elegance of which he was master, and it has both dignity and humour. Of the latter I cannot resist giving an example. When he was

at Lausanne he fell in love, but his father threatening to disinherit him, he prudently gave up the thought of marrying the object of his affections. He ends his recital of the episode with these words: ("I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son; and my wound was insensibly healed by time, absence, and the habits of a new life.") I think if the book contained nothing else, it would be worth reading for that delicious sentence.

Now I want to abandon the chronological order to which I have till now roughly adhered, in order to speak of two great novels, David Copperfield and Butler's The Way of All Flesh. This I do, not only because they are to a notable degree in the great tradition of the English novel, but also because they have eminently the features which, when I think of the works I have hitherto summarily considered, seem characteristic of English literature. With the possible exception of Tristram Shandy, all these books have in common something robust, straightforward, humorous and healthy which, I like to think, is representative of the race. There is no especial subtlety in them and they are somewhat wanting in delicacy. It is a literature of men of action rather than of men of thought. There is a lot of common sense about

it, some sentimentality and a great deal of humanity. Of David Copperfield there is nothing to be said but that it is Dickens' best novel. His defects are here least noticeable and his merits most remarkable. Many long novels have been written since *The Way of All Flesh*, but I think it is the last English novel to have been written in the grand manner; it is the last, of any importance, that owes nothing to the great novelists of France and Russia. It is a worthy successor of *Tom Jones*, and its author had in him something of the old lexicographer whom we have agreed to regard as the typical Englishman.

Then I go back to Jane Austen. I would not claim that she is England's greatest novelist; with all his faults of exaggeration, vulgarity, wordiness and sentimentality, Dickens remains that. He was prodigious. He did not describe the world as we know it; he created a world. He had suspense, drama and humour, and thus was able to give the feel of the multifariousness and bustle of life as, so far as I know, only one other novelist, Tolstoy, has done. Out of his immense vitality he fashioned a whole series of characters, diverse, individual, and tremulous—no, "tremulous" isn't the right word—turbulent with

life. He managed his complicated and often highly improbable stories with a dashing skill that perhaps you must be a novelist thoroughly to appreciate. But Jane Austen is perfect. It is true that her scope is restricted; she deals with a little world of country gentlefolk, clergymen and middle-class persons; but who has equalled her insight into character or surpassed the delicacy and reasonableness with which she probed its depths? She does not need my praise. The only characteristic I would like to impress upon your attention is one which she exhibits with so much ease that you might well take it for granted. Though, on the whole, nothing very much happens in her stories, and she mostly eschews dramatic incident, you are inveigled, I hardly know how, to turn from page to page by the urgent desire to know what is going to happen next; and that is the novelist's essential gift. Without it he is done. I can think of no one who possessed it more fully than Jane Austen. My only difficulty now is to decide which of her few novels especially to recommend. For my part, I like Mansfield Park best. I recognize that its heroine is a little prig and its hero a pompous ass, but I do not care; it is wise, witty and tender, a master-



piece of ironical humour and subtle observation.

At this point I would draw your attention to Hazlitt. His fame has been overshadowed by that of Charles Lamb, but to my mind he was the better essayist. Charles Lamb, a charming, gentle, witty creature whom to know was to love, has always appealed to the affections of his readers. Hazlitt could hardly do that. He was rude, tactless, envious and quarrelsome; a man, in truth, of an unpleasing character; but, unfortunately, it is not always the most worthy men who write the best books. In the end it is the personality of the artist that counts, and for my part I find more to interest me in the tormented, striving, acrimonious soul of Hazlitt than in Charles Lamb's patient but somewhat maudlin amiability. As a writer, Hazlitt was vigorous, bold and healthy. What he had to say, he said with decision. His essays are full of meat, and when you have read one of them you feel, not as you do when you have read one of Lamb's, that you have made a meal of savoury kickshaws, but that you have satisfied your appetite with substantial fare. Much of his best work can be found in his Table Talk, but there have been published a number of selections from his

essays, and none of these can fail to contain *My First Acquaintance With Poets*, which, I suppose, is not only the most thrilling piece he ever wrote but the finest essay in the English language.

Now, two more novels: Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. I can say little about them, for my space is growing short. Critics nowadays are inclined to carp at Thackeray. Perhaps he was unfortunate in his period. He should have lived and written in our own time, when he would not have been hampered by the conventions which prevented the Victorian novelist from telling the truth, however bitter, as he saw it. His point of view was modern. He was deeply conscious of the mediocrity of human beings and he was interested in the contradictions of their natures. And however much you may deplore his sentimentality and his sermonizing or regret the weakness that led him to defer unduly to the demands of the public, the fact remains that in *Becky Sharp* he created one of the most real, living and forcible characters in English fiction.

*Wuthering Heights* is unique. It is an awkward novel to read, because sometimes it so outrages

probability that you are completely bewildered; but it is passionate and profoundly moving; it has the depth and power of a great poem. To read it is not like reading a work of fiction, in which, however absorbed, you can remind yourself, if need be, that it is only a story; it is to have a shattering experience in your own life.

I can but name three novels which I think it would be a pity to have left unread. They are George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* and Meredith's *The Egoist*.

The reader will have noticed, perhaps with surprise, that hitherto I have said nothing of poetry. I do not think our race has produced either painters, sculptors or composers who can rank with the best of other countries; their achievements have been respectable rather than pre-eminent; but I do not believe it is a racial or national bias that leads me to claim that our poets are supreme. But because poetry is the flower and crown of literature, it cannot afford to be mediocre. I remember Edmund Gosse telling me that he would much rather read a volume of minor verse than an average novel; it took less time, he said, and required no mental effort. Well, I have

no use for verse, however accomplished; to me, unless poetry is great, it is nothing, and I would sooner read a newspaper. I cannot read poetry at all times and in all places. I want to be in a particular mood and I want a favourable environment. I like to read poetry in a garden towards the end of a summer day; I like to sit on a cliff with a view of the sea or to lie on a mossy bank in a wood and take out the volume I have brought in my pocket. But even the greatest poets have written a great deal that is tedious to read; many versifiers have written endless volumes and in the end produced no more than two or three poems. I think that is enough to justify them, but I do not want to read so much to gain so little. I like anthologies. The critics, I understand, have a contempt for them; they say that in order to appreciate an author you must read him in full. But I do not read poetry as a critic; I read it as a human being in need of solace, refreshment and peace. I am thankful to the sensitive scholar who has taken the trouble to weed out from the great mass of English poetry what is not so good and has left for my perusal only what is to my purpose. The three best anthologies I know are Palgrave's Golden Treasury, The

Oxford Book of English Verse, and the admirable English Galaxy of Shorter Poems, by Gerald Bullett. But we live in the world of today and we should not neglect the writings of the poets of our own time. They, too, may have something important to give us. Unfortunately, the only anthology that, to my knowledge, has been made of them is so inadequate that I forbear even to name it.

Of course, everyone must read the great tragedies of Shakespeare. He is not only the greatest poet that ever lived but the glory of our race. But knowing, as I do, these plays pretty well, I wish that someone with taste, knowledge and discretion could be found who would make an anthology of Shakespeare's plays and poems, putting in not only the famous passages with which we should all be familiar but also fragments, single lines even; so that I might have in a convenient volume a book to which I could always turn when I wanted the cream of all poetry.\*

\* Since I wrote these lines George Rylands has produced an anthology under the title of "The Ages of Man," which comes as near fulfilling the wish I have here expressed as, I suppose, anyone can expect. It is a welcome gift to a troubled world.



## II

**I**N my first chapter I confined myself to the works of English authors. They are the common inheritance of the English-speaking peoples. Now I want to tell you about some books in other languages, but for the sake of your convenience, only of such as can be read in translations: and that makes my pleasant task simpler, for it obliges me to leave poetry on one side. That you must read in the original or not at all. I am not a poet, and I speak of poetry with diffidence, but it seems to me that its sound is so inextricably part of the satisfaction it affords that no translation, however skilful, can do more than suggest its quality. I would go farther; and since words have for us associations that we have come by with our mother's milk, with recollections of our childhood, with our first love, we can to the full only appreciate poetry in our own native tongue.

Let us then deal only with prose. The first book I

wish to speak of is Don Quixote. Shelton made a translation of it early in the seventeenth century, but you may not find it very convenient to read; and since I want you to read with delight, I suggest that you should read it in Ormsby's more recent version, published in 1885. But I should like to warn you of one thing: Cervantes was a poor man and he was paid to provide a certain amount of work; he had by him, one may presume, some short stories, and it seemed to him a very good notion to use them to fill out his book. I have read them, but I read them as Doctor Johnson read *Paradise Lost*—as a duty rather than with pleasure—and if I were you, I would skip them. In Ormsby's version, in order to make it easy to do this, they are printed in smaller type. After all, it is Don Quixote himself you want—Don Quixote with his faithful Sancho Panza; he is tender, loyal and great-hearted; and though you cannot but laugh at his misadventures (less now than his contemporaries did, for we are more squeamish than they were and the jests that were played on him are sometimes too cruel to amuse us), you must be very insensitive if you do not feel for the Knight of the Rueful Countenance not only affection but respect. The fantasy of

man has never created a personage that so deeply appeals to a generous nature.

I do not want to speak of French literature just yet, because it is so rich, and contains so many books which I should like at least to name, that I am afraid if I once start upon it I shall leave myself no space to deal with certain books in other languages that I am sure it would be a real loss never to have read. But I should like here to mention one, since it, too, offers the portrait of a man, a man of a very different sort from Don Quixote, who insinuates himself into your affections in such a way that when you have once made his acquaintance he becomes your treasured friend. This is Montaigne, who in the course of his essays painted so complete a picture of himself, with his tastes, his oddities, his frailties, that you come to know him more intimately than you are likely ever to know any of your own friends. And in getting to know him you discover not a little about yourself, for in his patient and humorous examination of his own nature he threw a searching light on human nature in general. Much has been said of Montaigne's scepticism, and if to see that there are two sides to a question, and that when certainty is impossible it

is sensible to keep an open mind, is scepticism, I suppose he was a sceptic. But his scepticism taught him tolerance—a virtue our own day more than ever needs—and his interest in human beings, his enjoyment of life, led him to an indulgence that, could we but possess it, would help us not only to be happy ourselves but to make others happy also. *Sl*

Montaigne was magnificently translated by Florio, but perhaps the later translation of Cotton, edited by William Carew Hazlitt, will be found more readable by those who do not much care for the flamboyance of Elizabethan English. You can choose any of the essays at random and be sure of entertainment, but to get Montaigne at his best you would do better to read the third book as a whole. The essays it contains are longer, and so give greater scope for the charming discursiveness which is characteristic of him; they are more serious, though not less amusing; and in them, master as he was by then of his medium and confident in his readers' interest, he gives you the quintessence of his vagabond spirit. Do not think from the title that an essay will not interest you, for his titles have generally very little to do with the contents. In the essay entitled *On Some Verses of*

Virgil, for instance, you will find a disquisition on the French language which is one of the most enchanting things he ever wrote, and also a variety of remarks frank enough to bring a blush even to a cheek that is not prudish. /

Now I want to leap across a couple of centuries and try to persuade you to read a book which most people will tell you, if they have ever heard of it, is unreadable. This is Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, and it was very conscientiously translated by Carlyle. Goethe is under a cloud in Germany just now; he aimed at being a citizen of the world rather than a citizen of the state, and that is an attitude which finds small favour with the present rulers of his country; but even before they attained power *Wilhelm Meister* was little read even in Germany. Once, in Berlin, finding myself in a circle of intellectual persons, I aroused the utmost surprise by expressing my admiration for it. Not one of them had read it, for they had been given to understand that it was of unsurpassed dullness. I besought them to see for themselves, and when, a few months later, I met some of them again, I was not displeased to hear that they had listened to me and, having read the neglected book, were



disposed no longer to mock at my admiration. My opinion is that it is a very interesting and significant work. It is the last of the eighteenth-century novels of sentiment, it is the first of the romantic novels of the nineteenth century, and it is the forerunner of the autobiographical novels of which there has been in our own day such a plentiful crop. The hero is as colourless as are the heroes of most autobiographical novels. I do not quite know why this should be. Perhaps it is because when we write about ourselves we are disconcerted by the contrast between our aims and our achievements, and insensibly dwell on the disappointment we feel with ourselves for having made so much less of our opportunities than we had hoped to, and thus present the reader with a frustrated, rather than with a fulfilled, character. Perhaps it is that, just as when we walk down the street all the exciting things seem to happen on the other side, our own experiences appear so commonplace to us that we cannot describe them without making ourselves commonplace too; and it is only the experiences of others that have the thrilling quality of what is strange and romantic. But on the thread of this feckless creature Goethe has strung a great

number of curious incidents; he has surrounded him with unusual, varied and fantastic persons, and he has used him as a mouthpiece for his own ideas on all manner of subjects. Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship—I cannot recommend the Travels, which are intolerable—is at once poetical, absurd, profound and dull. Well, the dull parts you can skip. Carlyle said that he had not got so many ideas out of any book that he had read for six years, but it is only honest to add that he said also: "Goethe is the greatest genius that has lived for a century and the greatest ass that has lived for three."

Then, after another leap across the years, I must draw your attention to three Russian novels of the nineteenth century: Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Of the three authors, Turgenev is the least considerable. But he was an artist, with a delicate sense of the poetry of life, and he had charm, pathos and humanity. He does not greatly move, but neither does he bore; and in *Fathers and Sons*, by far his best novel, he has depicted for the first time in fiction the Nihilist who was the forerunner of the Communist of our own day. It is curious to recognize

in Bazarov, his hero, many of the traits which we have seen in men who, according to our political opinions, have wrought havoc or opened new vistas on the world we now live in. Bazarov is a brutal creature, but he is strangely impressive and not altogether unsympathetic; his power is manifest, and though he has no opportunity for action and so expends himself in words, you cannot but be convinced that, given propitious circumstances, he is capable of translating into deeds the ideas which his audacious mind has formulated. He has a dark and pitiful greatness.

When I began to write these pages I intended to recommend you to read Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* rather than *War and Peace*, for in my recollection it was the better novel of the two; but I took the precaution to read both books again, and now I have no doubt that *War and Peace* is incomparably the greater. In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy painted a rich and vivid picture of Russian society during the last half of the nineteenth century, but the story he had to tell has too much the aspect of a moral tract entirely to please me. Tolstoy strongly disapproved of Anna's love for Vronsky, and in order to bring it home to the reader that the wages of sin is death he

loaded the dice against her. There is no reason, except that Tolstoy had it in for her, why Anna shouldn't have divorced her husband, whom she had never loved and who cared nothing for her, married Vronsky and lived happily ever after. To bring about the tragic ending on which he had set his mind, Tolstoy had to make his heroine stupid, tiresome, exacting and unreasonable; and though, heaven knows, I would never deny that there are plenty of women who are all these, I do not find it possible greatly to sympathize with the troubles their folly has brought upon them.

If I hesitated about War and Peace, it is because it seems to me sometimes tedious. There are too many battles narrated in too great detail, and the experiences of Pierre with Freemasonry are exceedingly dull. But all this can be skipped. It remains a great novel. It describes in epic proportions the growth and development of an entire generation. The scene of action is all Europe from the Volga to Austerlitz; a vast number of persons, wonderfully realized, march across the huge stage; and this immense amount of material is consummately handled, with the minute attention to detail of a Dutch picture

when the occasion demands, and then, when a different treatment is needed, with the breathless sweep of Michael Angelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. You get an overwhelming impression of the confusion of life and of the pettiness of individuals in contrast with the dark forces that mould the fate of nations. War and Peace is a thrilling, tremendous novel. War and Peace is a work of genius. In it, by the way, Tolstoy did one of the most difficult things a novelist can do: he drew a perfectly natural, charming, lively portrait of a young girl; she is perhaps the most enchanting heroine of fiction; but then he did a thing that none but a great novelist would have thought of: in an epilogue he shows her to you as she has become when, happily married, she is the mother of a family. That exquisite creature has grown fussy, commonplace and a trifle too fat. You are shocked, but you have only for a moment to consider the matter to realize how likely this was to happen. It adds a last note of verisimilitude to this amazing novel. *Ln*

You will remember that in my first chapter I pointed out that it was useless, in my opinion, to read books that you did not enjoy; but now that I come



to *The Brothers Karamazov* I hesitate; for I wonder whether it is possible to read this long, powerful and tragic work with enjoyment. It depends on what you get enjoyment from. If you can get it from the sight of a storm at sea, from the fearful splendour of a forest fire or from the tumult of a great river in flood, then you will get it from *The Brothers Karamazov*. But I said also that I would speak only of books that you would be the poorer for not having read, only of books that in one way or another increased your spiritual riches and enabled you to live your life with greater fullness; and I have no doubt that *The Brothers Karamazov* rightly takes its place, perhaps a supreme place, in this list. There is nothing in fiction that remotely resembles the novels of Dostoevsky except the *Wuthering Heights* of our own Emily Brontë and Melville's *Moby Dick*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* is the most tremendous of all Dostoevsky's works. But you must not read it as though you were reading a novel about ordinary human beings such as you meet in the ordinary course of life. It is not for nothing that I spoke just now of a storm at sea or a forest on fire. Dostoevsky's characters have an affinity with the dark forces of nature. They are not

common mortals; passionate and intensely spiritual, excruciatingly sensitive, capable of the extremity of suffering, they are in everything inordinate. They are tormented by God. Their actions are the actions of madmen in a madhouse, but there is something strangely significant in their extravagance; and it is borne in upon you that in this agonized revealing of themselves they reveal hidden depths and terrible powers of the human soul.

The Brothers Karamazov is a shapeless book, of great length, and in parts diffuse; but except for certain chapters towards the end, it holds you with a firm grip; if it contains scenes of great horror, it contains others of great beauty. I know no novel in which the sublimity and the vileness of man are so wonderfully portrayed, none in which the tragic adventures and the shattering experiences of which his soul is capable are depicted with so much compassion and so much force. Dostoevsky had the deep tenderness for suffering human beings that only suffering can bring. "Be no man's judge," he says; "love men and do not be afraid of their sins; love man in his sin." It is with no sense of despair that you close the book, but with exhilaration, for the beauty of

goodness shines forth through the ugliness of crime. /

Upon looking back on what I have written, I notice that I have more than once suggested to you that you would be wise now and then to skip. Perhaps it was unnecessary. I surmise that only scholars will fail to exercise that useful art with the quotations from the Latin with which Montaigne, following the fashion of his day, plentifully peppered his essays; and it would be an assiduous reader indeed who could read in full the last few chapters of *The Brothers Karamazov*. I know that I found myself content to glance at rather than to peruse the speeches which Dostoevsky put into the mouths of counsel at the trial. I think all the books I have mentioned are important enough to be read thoroughly, but even they are more enjoyable if you exercise your right to skip. Change of taste has rendered certain parts of even great works tedious. We no longer want to be bothered with the moral dissertations of which the eighteenth century was so fond, nor with the lengthy descriptions of scenery which were favoured in the nineteenth. When the novel became realistic authors fell in love with detail for its own sake, and it took them a long time to discover that detail is interesting

only if it is relevant. To know how to skip is to know how to read with profit and pleasure, but how you are to learn it I cannot tell you, for it is a trick I have never acquired. I am a bad skipper; I am afraid of missing something that may be of value to me, and so will read pages that only weary me; when once I begin to skip, I cannot stop, and end the book dissatisfied with myself because I am aware I have not done it justice, and then am apt to think that I might just as well never have read it at all.

Now let me get back to French literature. It is the richest and most varied in the world except in one respect; the French on the whole are indifferent poets. They have on the other hand cultivated all the arts of prose with abundance and the most brilliant success. It is only proper that they should have had for so long so great an influence on the writers of our own nation, for till recently, in prose composition the French had almost everything to teach us and we almost everything to learn. France, of course, had manifest advantages: its central position in Europe, its dense population, its wealth, its civilization, were favourable to the growth of a great literature; and the natural bent of the French mind towards lucidity,

moderation and reasonableness—qualities more useful to the writer of prose than to the poet—was favourable to the emergence of great talent. French became a precise and logical language, enabling writers to express themselves with grace and clarity, when English, not yet having assimilated the languages it had been for centuries absorbing, was still muddled and cumbersome. From the immense wealth of this literature it is plain that in the small space at my disposal I can pick out but a handful of books.

The first one to which I would draw your attention is very short. It is *The Princess of Cleves*, by Madame de la Fayette. It was published in 1678, and the historians will tell you that it is the earliest psychological novel. That, of course, is interesting, but what is more to the point is that it is a very singular and a very modern story. The scene is the court of Henri II. The heroine, a very great lady and a virtuous woman, respects but does not love her husband, and when she meets the Duke of Nemours at a court ball, falls deeply in love with him. But she is determined not to dishonour herself; and so that she may with her husband's help more easily resist the temptation that distracts her, she confesses her passion to him.



He is a man of fine character and he trusts his wife, he knows that she is incapable of betraying him; but human nature is weak, and against his will he is racked with jealousy. He becomes suspicious, irritable, exasperating; I know nothing in fiction more natural than the way in which his character, under the strain, gradually deteriorates. It is a moving tale, for the personages concerned are desirous of doing what they consider their duty and are defeated by circumstances beyond their control. The moral seems to be that you should ask of no one more than it is in his power to give. It is an instructive book to read nowadays, when it seems generally accepted that love knows no law and that duty must in all cases yield to inclination.

Next I would have you read another novel, but of a very different sort. This is Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*. Its persons have none of the nobility of soul which enables those of *The Princess of Cleves* to face their tragic situation in the grand manner; they are but frail, erring human beings, and our hearts go out to them because we recognize in them our own weakness. Here is a human story. I envy anyone who reads this delicious book for the first time. How fresh, how natural and how charming is *Manon*, for all her

faults; and how moving is Des Grieux's constant love for the faithless creature! Weak? Of course he is weak. A baggage? Of course she is a baggage. She is inconstant, mercenary and cruel, and she is loving, generous and tender; the type is immortal, and I think it will be long before the memory of pretty Manon fades from the hearts of men.

Now let us speak of another short novel, Voltaire's *Candide*, within whose few pages are contained more wit, more mockery, more mischievous invention, more sense and more fun, than ever man compressed in so small a space. It was ostensibly written, as everyone knows, to ridicule the philosophical optimism which was then in fashion, and at a moment when the earthquake of Lisbon, with its widespread destruction and great loss of life, had given a nasty jar to the worthy people who believed that the world we live in is the best of all possible worlds. Never has a man had a more versatile and lively mind than Voltaire, and in this novel he exercised his cynical gaiety at the expense of most subjects which men have agreed to take seriously—religion and government, love, ambition and loyalty—and its moral, such as it is (and not a bad one either) is: Be

tolerant and cultivate your garden: that is, do whatever you have to do with diligence and fortitude.

Then I come to a very important work—The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is a book that few, I should imagine, will read without interest, though many will read it with disgust. But if you find the study of human nature the most absorbing of all studies, you cannot fail to find this book rewarding, for here you have a man who has laid bare his soul with candour. He does not, like many who have written of themselves, merely exhibit frailties which after all are rather engaging; he does not hesitate to show himself ungrateful, unscrupulous, dishonest, base and mean. You can have little sympathy with him, since he is despicable; and yet such is his love of natural beauty, so tender is his sentiment, so miraculous his narrative gift that, however great your repulsion, you are fascinated; and I don't know who, if he is completely honest with himself, can read the confessions of this weak-willed, petulant, vain and miserable creature without saying to himself: "After all, is there so much to choose between him and me? If the whole truth were known about me, should I, who turn away shocked from these revelations, cut

so pretty a figure?" So I warn you, I think no one can read this book without some disturbance to the self-complacency which is our chief defence in our dealing with this difficult world.

During the nineteenth century France was wonderfully rich in fiction. Its three greatest novelists were Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert. Taking him all in all, I suppose Balzac is the greatest novelist who ever lived. Like Dickens, he was more at his ease with the extraordinary than with the usual, and he depicted the vile with greater force than the deserving; but he was a creator even more prodigious than Dickens, and his scope was greater. He sought to write the history of society in his own time, and in some measure he succeeded. When you read him you do not feel that you are concerned with a limited group of persons, but with the commonweal at large, in which bigger issues than the fate of individuals are involved. I think he was the first novelist to realize the importance of affairs; his people have shops or go to business, make fortunes or lose them; and though love—as with all novelists—plays a large part in his novels, money is the motive force in the world of his invention. He wrote badly, he was excessive, he had no

taste, but he had a passion and a vigour which enabled him to create characters, extravagant and abnormal doubtless, who are violently and magnificently alive. He is often blamed for the melodramatic nature of his stories, but I ask myself how it is possible to expect that these exceptional persons should move in a world of measure and restraint. The storm needs the mountains and the sea for its grandeur. It is hard to choose one among the many deeply interesting novels that Balzac wrote, but since to my mind Father Goriot shows most completely his thrilling and varied power, I think that is the one I would recommend to your attention.

Stendhal wrote two novels which I would have you read; first, *The Red and the Black*, and then, if you like it as much as I do, *The Charterhouse of Parma*. For I must tell you that he is my favourite novelist. I like the plain and exact manner in which he wrote and the cool precision of his psychological analysis. He scrutinized the workings of the human heart with perspicacity. Energy was the quality that he most admired in men, and the creatures of his fancy that he has studied with most elaborate and anxious care are those who will allow no obstacle to prevent them



from exercising their forceful will and who will hesitate at no crime to achieve the end on which they have determined. To my mind, *The Red and the Black* is for its first two thirds one of the best novels ever written; I think it fails then, and for a very singular reason. Stendhal founded it on fact, but the character he invented, Julien Sorel, ran away with him, as the characters of our invention often do, and when Stendhal forced him to behave in such a way as to fit the actual circumstances which had been the inspiration of his story, you are disconcerted, for you cannot believe that the unscrupulous, ambitious and resolute man whom he has drawn would act with such a foolish disregard of consequences. Now I come to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. It is a landmark in the history of modern fiction. On reading it again recently I could not but feel that Flaubert's desire to be unshrinkingly objective had resulted in a certain frigidity of tone, a certain dryness, and this somewhat qualified my admiration; but I still thought it a great and powerful work. The characters are described with minuteness and verisimilitude. It leaves you, when you have finished it, with a feeling of profound, yet half-contemptuous, pity for those

commonplace people for whom life has proved so cruel. The persons that the author has set before you are so real, they suffer so desperately, that they cease to be merely individuals, they become typical of humanity; and if you must extract a moral from a novel, you may extract from *Madame Bovary* the not-unimportant one that idle dreams, reveries that have no chance of fulfilment, can lead only to disaster; and oddly enough you return to the moral of *Candide*—take things as they come and do your duty with good will.

I have reached the limits of my space, and though there are other books, of smaller consequence, which I should have liked to talk to you about, I must content myself with only briefly mentioning a few more. Benjamin Constant wrote a short novel called *Adolphe* in which, reversing the practice of most authors who are more inclined to describe the beginnings of a love affair, he has analyzed with rare power its decline. It is a real human document. In *The Three Musketeers* you have a grand romantic novel. It may not be literature, the characters may be sketchy and the plot ill-contrived, but it is wonderfully readable; and to be that, I may remind you, is the novelist's

indispensable faculty. Anatole France had a small but exquisite talent, which he displayed with rare felicity in a volume of stories called The Mother-of-Pearl Case. He was at one time too highly esteemed, but the neglect which has now befallen him is unjust.

Finally, I must remind you that our own time has produced in Marcel Proust a novelist who can stand comparison with the greatest. His work has been so well translated that I am inclined to think it alone, of all those I have mentioned, loses nothing in its English dress. He wrote one novel only, but that in fifteen volumes. When first they were made known to an astonished world, they were praised out of all reason. I myself wrote that I preferred being bored by Proust to being amused by any other writer. A second reading has made most of us assume a more sensible attitude. He is often repetitive, his self-analyses grow wearisome, and his obsession with the tedious emotion of jealousy fatigues in the long run even his most willing readers; but his defects are far more than compensated by his merits. He is a great and original writer. He has subtlety, creative power and psychological insight; but I think the future will hail him above all as a wonderful humorist. So I

recommend you to start at the beginning of this copious novel, read till you are bored, skip and start reading again; but to take care to miss nothing of *Madame Verdurin* or the *Baron de Charlus*. They are the richest creations of the comic fancy our time has seen.

One word more. In these two chapters I have drawn your attention to various books, and I have had little but good to say of them; for if I had not thought them in their various ways valuable, I would not have recommended you to read them. I have by the way said something of their authors; and I am conscious that it must seem rather absurd for me, as though I were a prospective Member of Parliament trying to get on good terms with voters, to give Jane Austen a chuck under the chin, as it were, a pat on the head to Goethe and a friendly nod to Dostoevsky. But I do not know what else I could have done. Merely to have given you a list of books would have been dull. In the short space allowed to me I could treat of them only summarily, but because I wanted to interest you in them I had to say at least something about them. All I can hope now is that if you read them, or any

# BOOKS AND YOU

of them, you will find them enjoyable as well as spiritually profitable; and I should be glad to think that when afterwards you look back on them you will feel, as I do, that you are the better for having read them, and that they have given you something of value that you would not be without.

This book is a new  
one for me. I have  
thought of it for some time  
only if any one  
will read it.  
He will be a  
great help.

Wm. H. H.

6th. April 1



### III

WHEN the two articles on books, English and foreign, which I wrote for The Saturday Evening Post appeared, a number of readers expressed the desire that I should write a third on American books. Thinking well of the suggestion, the editor passed it on to me; but I replied that this task was one that should evidently be entrusted to an American author. This, however, was apparently not what his readers wanted and so, not without misgiving, I agreed to do the best I could in the matter. I want to make my position clear. Though in the course of a long life I have read a great many American books—indeed I could not have been more than ten when with gales of laughter I read Artemus Ward and Helen's Babies—I cannot pretend that I have read nearly as widely as any American fond of reading will certainly have done. There is no reason why I should. I have read at random. There are books in every country that

have only a local interest, and the native of another country cannot be expected to find in them much to his purpose. I have not for example felt any need to read the works of Jonathan Edwards, and I have found the dialect of Uncle Remus a stumbling-block too difficult for me to cope with. I claim no authority for any of the opinions I shall here express; I shall state why I hold them; but I freely acknowledge that they are those of an Englishman who has read from his national standpoint and whose opinions thus have a certain bias. I am aware that some of them, disagreeing with the common judgments of critical authority in the United States, may arouse disapproval. I have sought what was most American in American literature and have felt little inclination to concern myself with such writers as found their inspiration in England. To interest me an American book must smack of the soil. I cannot think that I shall be able to tell Americans anything they do not know about the books I propose shortly to discuss, but it may be that I shall be able to give foreigners, including my own countrymen, a list of books which will give them an inkling of the Americanism of America and so enable them to get an understanding of the

influences which have gone to form the character of a people with which the future must bring them into ever-increasing communication.

I propose to deal only with those works which may be justly regarded as classics. I shall omit all mention of recent productions, partly from an inadequate knowledge of them and partly because it is too soon to tell what in the immense output of the last fifty years will prove to be of permanent and characteristic value. Contrary to some critical opinion, it is no proof that because a great many people have wanted to read a book and so made it a best seller, it is worthless; *David Copperfield*, *Father Goriot* and *War and Peace* have all been best sellers; but neither is it proof that it is a masterpiece; it may appeal for any one of a dozen reasons and when those reasons no longer obtain it may be unreadable. My own plan is never to let myself be persuaded to read a best seller for two or three years after publication; it is astonishing then how many books that have been received with acclamation I find I can without loss leave unread.

I must remind you here of something that I have already insisted upon, namely that I am very strongly

of opinion that you should read for enjoyment. To my mind it is very ill-advised to look upon reading as a task; reading is a pleasure, one of the greatest that life affords, and if these books of which I am now going to speak to you do not move, interest or amuse you, there is no possible reason for you to read them. It is from this consideration, indeed, that I set out to write my article with somewhat less diffidence than, since I was treating of matters in which I could not pretend to be expert, I might reasonably be supposed to have felt. For, conscious that my knowledge was imperfect, when I set about gathering my materials, I read two or three standard histories of American literature. I wanted to compare my views with those of the highest authorities, and when I found that these did not agree with mine, consider whether my own should be modified. But I was very much surprised to discover that they were almost exclusively concerned with matters that I thought had nothing to do with literature. They enlarged, often in an interesting fashion and I have no doubt with sound judgment, upon the social conditions which prevailed when such and such an author wrote, and upon the political circumstances which influenced

his work; they discussed his ideas on the burning questions of the day and examined the philosophical implications of his thought. And what not. But they did not seem to think it worth while to say much about his style; they showed small interest in the solidity of his construction, the ingenuity of his invention or the originality of his characterization; they did not trouble to say whether he was readable or not. So far as I could see, it had entirely escaped the attention of these conscientious gentlemen that a book may be read for delight and that literature is an art.

But literature is an art. It is not philosophy, it is not science, it is not social economy, it is not politics; (it is an art. And art is for delight.)

There is but one more thing to say before I get down to the business of commenting on the books I have chosen to speak of. It must not be expected that they will make such a show as those I have briefly discussed in my previous chapters. (Genius is a word often loosely applied; I would not myself apply it to the author of three or four successful plays or of two or three successful novels; genius to my mind is something that arises very rarely, and I am not sure



that I should be comfortable in applying it to any of the authors I shall presently mention. It is well enough to have talent. Some of these men had great talent; others had less. Most of them had formidable difficulties to contend with; whether they were conscious of it or not, in order to create a national literature they had to fight their way through the obstruction of the foreign influences to which they were subjected, not only by their own upbringing but also by their readers' prejudices; they were living in a new country, in process of forming its own civilization, and practical matters had naturally an importance which thrust the arts into the background. As we know, some writers felt themselves unable to cope with the situation and fled to what they thought was the happier environment of Europe. It may be that those who wisely remained would have created more perfect works if circumstances had been more favourable; it speaks well for the vigour of their minds and the authenticity of their talents that they should notwithstanding everything have produced works of uncommon merit. American literature is not much more than a hundred years old. It is only just to remember that English literature would

not be the magnificent monument to the English spirit that it is if you left out of it (to say nothing of Chaucer, Shakespeare and the great poets and prose writers of the seventeenth century) the whole of the eighteenth; if it had no Pope, no Swift, no Fielding, no Doctor Johnson and no Boswell.

Yet it is with a book written in the eighteenth century that I propose to begin. The histories of literature contain few autobiographies; they contain none more consistently entertaining than Benjamin Franklin's. It is written plainly, as befitted its author, but in pleasant easy English, for Franklin, as we know, had studied under good masters; and it is interesting not only for its narrative but for the vivid and credible portrait which the author has succeeded in painting of himself. I cannot understand why in America Franklin is often spoken of with depreciation. Fault is found with his character; his precepts are condemned as mean and his ideals as ignoble. It is obvious that he was not a romanticist. He was shrewd and industrious. He was a good business man. He wished the good of his fellow-men, but was too clear-sighted to be deceived by them, and he used their failings with pawky humour to achieve the ends,

sometimes selfish, it is true, but as often altruistic, that he had in view. He liked the good things of life, but accepted hardship with serenity. He had courage and generosity. He was a good companion, a man of witty and caustic conversation, and he liked his liquor; he was fond of women, and being no prude, took his pleasure of them. He was a man of prodigious versatility. He led a happy and a useful life. He achieved great things for his country, his state and the city in which he dwelt. To my thinking he is as truly the typical American as Doctor Johnson is the typical Englishman, and when I ask myself why it is that his countrymen are apt to grudge him their sympathy, I can only think of one explanation. He was entirely devoid of hokum. *Gr*

Now let us come without further delay to the nineteenth century. The outstanding figures are Herman Melville, Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe, and if I were constrained to ascribe genius to three American writers I would unhesitatingly choose these names. But I will not speak of them yet. What I want to trace in this article, so far as my limited knowledge extends and my space permits, is the emergence of Americanism in American literature;

for that, I repeat, is what chiefly interests me and should, I think, interest you; and so I shall attempt no chronological order. I may add, to save repetition, that I shall only speak of books which I think are for one reason or another eminently readable. No one can afford not to read them; no educated person can read them without both profit and pleasure.

I am bound to confess, however, that on rereading *The Scarlet Letter* for my present purpose the profit and pleasure I gained were of a limited character. I see no harm in putting things in their proper place, and I must point out to you that the last forty years have seen the rise in America of at least half a dozen much better novelists than Hawthorne ever was. It is only prejudice and the fact that they are alive and in our midst that can blind us to it. But *The Scarlet Letter* is a famous romance, and it has been read, I suppose, by every American who has read anything at all. For my part I found the introduction entitled *The Custom House*, more interesting than the tale. It has charm, lightness and humour. The first thing you ask of a novel is that you should believe it; if you feel instinctively that the characters do not behave with ordinary common sense the spell is

broken and the novelist has lost his hold on you. Now, Hawthorne early in his narrative was faced with a difficulty; a reason had to be found why Hester Prynne, free to go anywhere, should decide to remain in the place where the humiliation to which she had been exposed must make her life intolerable; and he found it naturally enough in her love for Arthur Dimmesdale, which was so great that she preferred, notwithstanding the attendant shame, to remain where *he* was. But Hawthorne did not face a much greater difficulty, for if he had he could never have written the story he did: the facts of life were not unknown to the Puritans, who were as practical as they were pious, and no stork brought the baby to a Hester who never suspected that such an event was in prospect. It is incredible that she should not have gone to some distant place to be secretly delivered of her child, and if the lovers could not bear to be separated, it is hard to understand why, since on a later occasion they had no difficulty in arranging to sail back to Europe together, they should not have adopted such an obvious course when the occasion was so much more urgent. For all they knew Roger Chillingworth was dead and, like Benjamin Franklin



with the respectable Miss Read a century later, they could have effected a common-law marriage. Hawthorne did not possess the gift of creating living characters; Roger Chillingworth is merely a bundle of malignancies, not a human being, and Hester is but a fine piece of statuary. The Reverend Mr Dimmesdale comes to life only when, the pair having finally decided on flight, he is anxious to know the precise time at which the vessel on which they propose to sail may be expected to depart. He has composed his Election Sermon and is unwilling not to deliver it. That is a nice and human touch. It is not then for its story that I would have you read The Scarlet Letter and if you have done so already to read it again, but for the impressive quality of its language. Hawthorne formed his style on the great writers of the eighteenth century. Such a phrase as: "there was never in his heart so much cruelty as would have brushed the down off a butterfly's wing," might well have been written by Sterne, and he would have been pleased with it. Hawthorne had a delicate ear and great skill in the construction of an elaborate phrase. He could write a sentence half a page long, rich with subsidiary clauses, that was

resonant, balanced and crystal clear. He could be splendid and various. His prose had the sober opulence of a Gothic tapestry, but under the restraint of his taste it never became turgid or monotonous. His metaphors were significant, his similes apt, and his vocabulary fitting to his matter. Fashions come and go in literature and it may well be that the hairy-chested, rough-neck prose which is in favour today will in the future lose its vogue. It may be that readers will ask for a more formal, a more distinguished way of writing; authors then will be glad to learn from Hawthorne how to manage a sentence of more than half a dozen words, how to combine dignity with lucidity, and how without pedantry to please both the eye and the ear.

Since Hawthorne belongs to what historians of literature call the School of Concord, of which Emerson and Thoreau were distinguished members, this seems a fitting place to speak of them. The interest of *Walden* must depend on the taste of the reader. For my part I read it without boredom, but without exhilaration. It is very pleasantly written, in a style without formality, with ease and grace; but if I were snowbound on a Western prairie, with a deaf

mute as my only companion, I must admit that I should be dismayed to find that Thoreau's *Walden* was the only book in the log cabin. It is the kind of work which needs an author of vigorous personality, with a background of singular experience and a store of out-of-the-way learning; but Thoreau was a man of supine character, his knowledge of the world was small, and his reading, though respectable, followed a well trodden path. I do not think he had the emotional force to make the experiment which is the theme of his book very important. He discovered that if you limit your wants you can satisfy them at small expense. We knew that. "It contributes greatly towards a man's moral and intellectual health," says Hawthorne, "to be brought into habits of companionship with individuals unlike himself, who care little for his pursuits, and whose sphere and abilities he must go out of himself to appreciate." This is very true, and none should take it more to heart than the writer of books.

Emerson, of course, is a figure of much greater substance. I was first led to read him many years ago by a fair-haired lady I met on the Lake of Como. On the excursions we took she always carried a

volume of the Essays with her and she had heavily underlined in blue pencil (perhaps to bring out the colour of her eyes) the passages that particularly struck her. There were at least two or three on every page. She told me that she found Emerson a great solace. She said that in all the tribulations and difficulties of her life she went to him and found something to her purpose. I met her again many years later in Hawaii and she very kindly asked me to lunch with her at a house she had rented for the season. She had always been wealthy, but since our last meeting had come up in the world, for her husband had been raised to the peerage and she was now a woman of title. She received me in a Callot dress (the Sisters Callot being then the most fashionable dressmakers in Paris), wearing a pearl chain which must have cost fifty thousand pounds, but no shoes or stockings. "You see," she said, pointing to her bare feet, "here we lead the simple life." I thought it a pity they had bunions on them. At that moment a Chinese butler, dressed very like one of the Ming emperors, brought in a tray of cocktails. I asked her if she still read Emerson. She seized a volume from the table and clasped it to her by this

time withering bosom, and told me, indeed yes, she never went anywhere without a volume of the Essays; she waved a jewelled hand at the blue sea which you saw through the open windows and said that except for Emerson she would never really have grasped the spiritual significance of the Pacific Ocean. She died a little while ago at a ripe old age, but a disciple of Emerson to the last, and she left her yacht and her library to the gigolo who had been the other solace of her declining years. Since she did not leave him enough money to run the yacht he sold it, but secondhand books fetch little and it may be that he kept the library. In that case I can only hope he found the Emerson a solace in his bereavement. I must admit that he has never been a solace to me. I do not wish to speak disrespectfully of a writer in whom his fellow-countrymen take pride; I recognize the charm and benignity of his character; when you read his journals you cannot but be impressed by the thoughtfulness which possessed him, even when he was no more than a young boy, and by the fluency with which he expressed himself; and since he was a lecturer, with the platform in view when he wrote, it may be that his voice and presence added a



significance to his discourse which is lost in the printed page; but I can only confess that I cannot find much profit or entertainment in his celebrated Essays. Often he hardly escapes the commonplace by a hair's breadth. He had a gift of the picturesque phrase, but too often it is empty of meaning. He is a nimble skater who cuts elegant and complicated figures on a surface of frozen platitudes. Perhaps he would have been a better writer if he had not been quite so good a man. But since in the case of so famous an author one's natural curiosity impels one to ask what it is that has given him such a position in the world of letters, I should recommend you to read his English Traits. In this book he was bound down to the concrete and so there is less in it of the vague, loose and superficial thinking which in his Essays he was apt to indulge in; he thus managed to be more vivid, more actual and more entertaining than in any of his other works. I certainly read it with pleasure.

It may be that the writers of the School of Concord have a value to Americans which the foreigner cannot hope to comprehend; he must be content to leave it and pass on. This is not the case with Edgar Allan

Poe; indeed he is, I think, more honoured in Europe than in the land of his birth, and in France, for example, his influence is still powerful with his fellow-writers. It may be that his moral character and the unsatisfactory nature of his life have unjustly caused Americans to hold him in less esteem than he deserves. But neither an author's character nor his life has anything to do with the reader, who is concerned only with his works. Poe wrote the most beautiful poetry that has ever been written in America. It is like some of those great pictures of the Venetians whose sudden loveliness takes your breath away so that, for the moment satisfied by the appeal to your senses, you do not care that they can give you no matter for your fancy to work upon. They have nothing but their beauty to offer, but their beauty is matchless. Poe, furthermore, was an acute critic and his analysis of the art of the short story for long governed the practice of his successors. His tales have never been excelled. I need hardly remind you that in *The Gold Bug* and the narratives in which Monsieur Dupin figures he invented the detective story which has resulted in the flood of books which we all of us at times are glad to read. The field has

been cultivated by a great many writers with variety and success, but in essentials no one has added anything to what he at his first attempt accomplished. It may be that his stories of horror and mystery owe something to Hoffmann and to Balzac, but they wonderfully achieve the end he set himself, for he was the most self-conscious of artists, and they deserve their renown. He wrote in a turgid style, and he was lavish of romantic accessories; his dialogue was as bombastic as his people were unreal; his range was narrow; but that you have to put up with: what he has to give us is unique. He wrote very little and almost all he wrote can be read with enjoyment. But there is nothing peculiarly American in him; there is nothing that I can remember either in his prose or his verse that could not have been written by an Englishman, and if we are looking in American literature for something that has in it a relish of the soil we must certainly seek further.

But before doing this I must speak of an author who turned his back deliberately on the American scene. Henry James was not the greatest writer that America has produced, but surely the most distinguished. His gifts were conspicuous; but there was

some defect in his character, one must suppose, that prevented him from making the most of them. He had humour, insight, subtlety, a sense of drama; but a triviality of soul that made the elemental emotions of mankind, love and hatred, the fear of death and the sense of life's mystery, incomprehensible to him. No one ever plumbed the surface of things with a keener scrutiny, but there is no indication that he was ever aware of the depths beneath it. He looked upon *The Ambassadors* as his best novel; I read it again the other day and I was appalled by its emptiness. It is tedious to read on account of its convoluted style; no attempt is made to render character by manner of speech, and everyone speaks like everyone else, in pure Henry James; the only living person in the book is Mrs Newsome who never appears in the flesh; and Strether is a silly, meanly inquisitive old woman. It would be intolerable but for Henry James's great gift (the novelist's essential gift) of carrying the reader on from page to page by the desire to know what is going to happen next, and by the wonderful atmosphere of Paris in spring and summer which no one, to the best of my knowledge, has so exquisitely conveyed. I much prefer *The*

American. It is written with lucidity and elegance, with some pomposity perhaps (people do not go away, they depart; they do not go home, but repair to their domiciles; and they do not go to bed, they retire); but that gives it a period flavour that I do not find displeasing. It is a curious novel in this respect, that it is a love story in which there is no love. Christopher Newman wishes to marry Madame de Cintr  because he wants a mother for his children and she will grace the head of his table, and when the engagement is broken off his pride is humiliated but his heart is unaffected. The characters are not human beings; the men are stuffed shirts and the women are crinolines. Madame de Cintr , though charming, graceful and elegant, is a purely conventional figure who gives you the impression that she is drawn not from nature, but from a diligent perusal of Balzac's novels. Balzac, however, was able to give his most conventional creatures something of his own exuberant vitality; Henry James had nothing of the sort to give, and she has no more life in her than a fashion-plate in a Lady's Keepsake. Newman, the American, is the Western pioneer, and indeed, judging from the period at which the story is set, he may



well have taken part in the gold rush to California; but Henry James seems to have known the sort of man he was trying to portray too little to give his hero even a superficial plausibility. Newman could scarcely have learnt his epistolary style in a pool-room at St Louis or on the water front in San Francisco. My own belief is that he fooled Henry James, and that the real reason why the aristocratic Bellegardes refused the projected alliance was not that Newman had made his fortune in business, but that, as they fortunately discovered in time, he was really an assistant instructor in English at the University of Harvard. But for all that *The American* is well worth reading. So great is Henry James's skill in telling a story, so rare his sense of suspense and so sure his touch in working up to a dramatic situation, that you are held from beginning to end. It is as exciting as a detective story and, after all, no more incredible; and you cannot remain unconscious of the charm of contact with the author's amiable, urbane and cultivated mind. *The American* is not a great book, but it is a very readable one: there are not many novels of which you can say that sixty years after their appearance.

I will speak of a great book now. This is Moby Dick. I read Melville's South Sea books, Omoo and Typee, when I was myself on the islands and I read them with interest and pleasure, but I have never been tempted to read them again and I have not read Pierre, accepting the opinion of good critics that Melville went to pieces when he wrote it. But Moby Dick is enough for any man's reputation. Some critics have complained of the flamboyance of its style. To my mind it is written in a manner that wonderfully suits the theme. Grandiloquence is an affair of hit or miss; when it comes off you may reach the sublime, when it doesn't you descend to the ridiculous. I must admit that sometimes Melville does so descend; but it is beyond human powers to walk always on the topmost heights, and his tumbles may be condoned when you consider how splendidly, with what a noble force, with what a sustained splendour of phrase, he writes his best passages. There are a number of chapters, the chapters of antiquarian lore mugged-up in a library and those dealing with the natural history of the whale, which I find tedious; but it is obvious that Melville set great store on his recondite knowledge, and you have to

accept the crotchets of an author of great parts. Homer sometimes nods and Shakespeare can write passages of empty rhetoric. But in the scenes at New Bedford, and when he describes events, when he deals with men, above all of course with the tremendous Ahab, then he is magnificent. There is a throb, a mystery, a foreboding, a passion, a sense of the horror and terror of life, of the inevitableness of destiny and of the power of evil, which take you by the throat. You are left shattered, but strangely uplifted. And if you are a writer you are proud to think that you cultivate an art which is capable of such altitudes and which can work such wonderful effects on the hearts and senses and minds of men. *Sh*

But though Melville began his story in New Bedford and the action takes place in an American whaler, I do not find in his book that flavour of the soil, valuable because it is specific, which I am looking for. His culture was European. His prose gives you the impression of having been founded on that of the great English stylists of the seventeenth century. And though his characters, at least the important ones, are American, they are so by accident; they are a little larger than life size and they are inhabit-

ants really of no definite country, but native to that thrilling and strange realm in which live and torture one another the persons of Dostoevsky's novels and the stormy creatures of Wuthering Heights. It would be difficult in any case, and impossible in the space allotted to me, to say exactly what I mean by the American tang: it is in literature that characteristic which differentiates a work from any that could possibly have been written in another country and so marks it as the unmistakable product of its environment; but I can point to a very good instance of it. You have it conspicuously in Mark Twain, and he gives it you in all its richness and savour in Huckleberry Finn. This book stands head and shoulders above the rest of his work. It is an authentic masterpiece. At one time Mark Twain was somewhat patronized because he was a humorist, and the pundits are apt to look askance at contemporary humour; but his death has reassured them and now he is, I think, universally accepted as one of the greatest of American authors. I need in consequence say little about him. I would only point out one circumstance. When Mark Twain tried to write in a literary manner he produced (as in Life on the

Mississippi) but indifferent journalese; but in *Huckleberry Finn* he had the happy idea of writing in the person of his immortal hero and so produced a model of the vernacular style which, I conjecture, has proved a valuable stimulus to some of the best and most characteristic American writers of the present day. He showed them that a living manner of writing is not to be sought in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers of England, but in the current speech of their own people. It would be foolish to suppose that the language in which *Huck Finn* expresses himself is what painters call representational; no illiterate small boy could have conceived such neat phrases or made such an apt choice of epithets. Perhaps because he thought it beneath the dignity of literature to write thus colloquially in the first person, Mark Twain, using a literary artifice which we gladly accept, made believe that these were the actual utterances of his little hero; and in so doing freed American style from the shackles that had so long bound it. *Huckleberry Finn*, with its amazing variety of invention, its gusto and life, is in the tradition of that great and celebrated variety of fiction, the picaresque novel; and it holds its place bravely with



the two greatest examples of the genre, Gil Blas and Tom Jones; in fact, if Mark Twain had not had the unfortunate notion of bringing in that boring little muttonhead Tom Sawyer to ruin the last few chapters, it would have been faultless. *W*

My space is growing so short that I can do no more than mention The Oregon Trail. Parkman made his journey less than a hundred years ago, and at that time buffaloes ranged the prairie in hundreds of thousands and the danger from hostile Indians was still something to be reckoned with. He was a man of courage, resolution and dry humour; with these qualities and a grand subject he wrote a book which is entertaining from cover to cover. It is so good that one cannot but regret that it is written without grace. *W*

I must also say a few words about Emily Dickinson. I am afraid that I shall offend many persons in America when I confess that to my mind she has been accorded more praise than she deserves. She has been hailed as the great American poet. But poetry has nothing to do with nationality. Poets inhabit the empyrean and belong to no country. Do we talk of Homer as a great Greek poet or of Dante as a great

Italian poet? To do so would be to depreciate them. Nor should our judgment be affected by the circumstances of a poet's life. That Emily Dickinson had an unhappy love affair and lived for many years in seclusion, that Poe tippled and was ungrateful to those who befriended him, neither makes the poetry of the one any better nor that of the other any worse. Emily Dickinson is best read in anthologies. There her wit, her poignancy, her simplicity make their utmost effect, and it may be that most anthologies would be the richer if they were less niggardly in their selections; but when you read the whole body of her work you are likely to be disappointed. She is at her best when she allows herself to sing; when her rhythm is modulated and varied, when her language serves her emotion and when her invention is spontaneous. But she is too rarely at her best. Like Miss Emmeline Grangerford, Emily Dickinson could rattle off poetry like nothing. There is a great deal of monotony in her constant use of the common or ballad metre in a stanza of four lines; it is in itself a limiting form, and she narrows it still more because her ear was not subtle and her language was seldom simple enough for the measure. She had a strain of

sophistication which induced her too often to sacrifice lyric beauty to a desire to make a clever point. In the short epigrammatic poems she wrote it is a matter of hitting the nail accurately on the head; she was very apt to give it a little tap slightly on one side. She had a gift, but a small one, and it is only confusing when claims are made on her behalf which there is little in her work to justify. Poetry is the crown of literature, but we have the right to demand that its pearls should not be cultured nor its rubies reconstructed. America will produce poets (indeed I am inclined to think it has already done so) who will make the encomiums lavished on Emily Dickinson appear extravagant. *Ms/12.11.62*

Now I have but Walt Whitman to speak of. I have kept him to the end, because I think it is in *Leaves of Grass* that we at last get, free from European influences, the pure and unadulterated Americanism which in these pages we have sought. *Leaves of Grass* is a work of immense significance, but since I began by reminding you that I would recommend you to read books which, whatever their other merits, were enjoyable, I am constrained to tell you that few great poets have been more uneven than

Whitman. I think many books are spoilt for readers because the critics speak of them as though they had no defects. Perfection is not of this world, and generally merits can only be achieved at the cost of shortcomings. It is much better that the reader should know what to expect; otherwise, finding himself at variance with the panegyrists, he will unduly blame himself for not appreciating something that in fact does not merit appreciation. Whitman was a writer of splendid beginnings, but either because he found his way of writing too easy or because he was intoxicated with his own verbosity, often enough he went on and on when he had nothing of significance to add to what he had already said. That you must put up with. He wrote his poems partly in the rhythmic language of the Bible, partly in the sort of blank verse that was written in the seventeenth century, and partly in an uncouth pedestrian prose that offends the ear. Well, that you must put up with too. These defects are regrettable, but unimportant. It is easy to skip. *Leaves of Grass* is a book to open anywhere, read on as long as it pleases you, and then turn the pages and start at random elsewhere. Whitman could write lines of pure and

lovely poetry, he could turn phrases that thrill, and often he hit upon ideas that were wonderfully moving. There can be no need for me to say that he is one of the most exciting of all poets. He had a vigour and a sense of life, in its manifold variety, in its passion, beauty and exhilaration, which an American may justly and with pride think truly American. He brought poetry home to the common man. He showed that it was not only to be found in moonlight, ruined castles and the pathos of lovesick maidens; but in streets and trains and steamboats, in the labour of the artisan and the humdrum toil of the farmer's wife, in work and ease; in all life, in short, and the ways it is lived. Just as Wordsworth showed that you need not use poetic language to make poetry, but could make it out of the common words of our everyday speech, so Whitman showed that its subject matter was not only where the romantics had sought it, but was all about you in the most usual circumstances of your daily round. His was not a poetry of escape, but a poetry of acceptance. It would be a dull-spirited American who could read Whitman without receiving a greater apprehension of the vastness of his country, the splendour of its



resources, and the illimitable hope that is contained in its future. I think it was really in Whitman that America became aware of itself in literature. It is a virile, democratic poetry; it is the authentic battle cry of a new nation and the solid foundation of a national literature. In European museums you sometimes see the genealogy of the house of Jesse depicted as a tree, with Adam massively outlined in the trunk and the branches ending in figures of the patriarchs and the kings of Israel. If such a tree were made to represent the development of American literature and the branches ended with the shapes of O. Henry, Ring Lardner, Theodore Dreisser, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsay, Eugene O'Neill and Edwin Arlington Robinson, the trunk would be rough-hewn in the splendid, dauntless and original form of Walt Whitman.

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